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Department of*
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**



DISTRICT 8 HUNTING PROSPECTS

Yakima and Kittitas counties

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DISTRICT 8 GENERAL OVERVIEW

District 8 is located in south central Washington. Game management units (GMUs) in District 8 include 328 (Naneum), 329 (Quilomene), 330 (West Bar), 334 (Ellensburg), 335 (Teanaway), 336 (Taneum), 340 (Manastash), 342 (Umtaneum), 346 (Little Naches), 352 (Nile), 356 (Bumping), 360 (Bethel), 364 (Rimrock), 368 (Cowiche), 371 (Alkali) and part of 372 (Rattlesnake Hills). Hunters can choose a variety of habitats, ranging from lowland shrubsteppe and farmland to high elevation alpine wilderness.

District 8 is dominated by large blocks of public land and provides abundant hunting opportunities. The district is probably best known for elk. The Yakima elk herd is one of the largest in the state, with over 9,000 animals roaming over 900,000 acres of public land. There are over 5,000 elk in the Colockum herd, which inhabit mostly public land north of Ellensburg.

There is also plenty of upland bird hunting opportunity in District 8. Yakima County is near the top of the list in the harvest of many bird species, ranking #1 for quail, #2 for dove and chukar, #3 for pheasant, #4 for duck, and #5 for goose. Bird hunters wanting to wander over large areas with low hunter densities have many areas to choose from. Along the breaks of the Columbia, the Yakima Training Center consists of 327,000 acres south of I-90, while WDFW manages another 154,000 acres north of the freeway. There are 9,000 acres on the Wild Horse Wind Farm, which has gone to a [Hunt by Reservation system](#). West of the Yakima River, hunters can roam the 105,000-acre Wenas Wildlife Area. A motivated upland bird hunter with a good dog could pursue grouse, chukar, huns, quail, and pheasant in the same day.

Turkeys are a relative newcomer to the district. Birds were first introduced over 30 years ago, but populations remained low. In the late 1990s, a more extensive effort was made to augment existing pockets of birds. Post augmentation, the spring harvest increased from 60 in 2001 to 413 in 2010. Harvest has recently hovered around 100 birds. The populations in GMU 335 (Teanaway) have become large enough to allow for a fall permit season. Turkey densities may never reach those found in northeast Washington, but many hunters are finding decent hunting closer to home.

District 8 is also home to over 70 percent of the bighorn sheep in the Washington State. While it is still difficult to draw a permit to hunt, bighorns can certainly add enjoyment to a hunting trip. Rams are in rut mid-October through November, when many hunters are traveling through the area. There are robust populations of bighorns that can often be easily viewed along Highways 821 (Yakima River Canyon) and 410 (Clemans Mountain, north of the junction with Highway 12).

Important Access Changes: Starting last year, two changes have occurred. Access to the Wild Horse Wind Farm northeast of Ellensburg will be going to a Hunt by Reservation system. WDFW will be issuing the permits. To watch the video and register, go to

http://wdfw.wa.gov/hunting/hunting_access/private_lands/hunt/292/. There are three time periods for registration. The number of people is unrestricted for the periods before and after the modern firearm elk seasons. For the modern firearm elk season, registration is restricted to 50 people per day. Those failing to get one of the 50 spots can drive through the facility, but can't stop and hunt.

Required identification for access to Yakima Training Center (YTC) has changed. A Washington State driver's license is still required to drive on post, but it is no longer a valid form of proof of identity for accessing YTC or any other military facility. An Enhanced Washington State Driver License or a passport are among the valid forms of identification. For more information on approved form of identity, orientation, and other rules on YTC, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

ELK



This district is the best in the state for elk hunting. However, with that distinction comes relatively high hunter densities. Opening weekend is usually crowded. However, a recent trend has been for hunters to pull up camp and head home before the season ends. If you are looking for a higher quality experience, consider hunting the last two or three days of the modern firearm season or switching to archery or muzzleloader. GMUs 328 and 329 recently opened for both archery and muzzleloader hunters. In 2016, archery general season success in GMUs 328 and 329 was double that of modern firearm and most other archery GMUs.

Surveys this past winter found surprisingly low elk numbers, especially in the Yakima herd, which declined from 10,856 to 8,326 in February surveys. The Colockum herd was down to

4,672 from 5,087 last March. One of the main reason for the decline appears to be the drought of 2015. That drought left elk in poor condition entering fall 2015. The result was low calf recruitment and higher than normal late winter mortality in 2015-16. That mortality was captured in the March 2016 Colockum surveys, but missed in the February 2016 Yakima surveys. Winter 2016-17 was even longer and tougher than the previous winter, but mortality was not as high. A large portion of the total herd decline was in calves, which have the lowest numbers ever seen in the district. This does not bode well for general season spike hunters, as fewer calves seen on February/March surveys means fewer legal elk in the fall.

For many big game hunters in eastern Washington, drawing a special permit in the quality elk category is the ultimate opportunity. That certainly applies to District 8, where the majority of quality elk permits are available in the south-central part of the state. Our advice to most hunters who come here is to continue hunting the general elk season for spikes, but keep putting in for special permit hunts and accruing bonus points, so when a quality elk permit comes through, they will already know the landscape. Quality elk hunting in this part of the state includes a very good chance of seeing several mature bulls in a season. Currently, adult bull numbers remain strong.

Modern firearm elk hunting success in this district is often related to migration/weather. Harvest in the upper elevations tends to be relatively stable, but when some elk move into lower, more open elevations, overall harvest increases. The 2017 modern firearm season is Oct. 28 – Nov. 5.

Although a few hunters seem to believe the elk have all moved to Mt. Rainer during the fall hunting season, the reality is that most stay within units open to hunting. Figure 2 shows the distribution of collared Yakima elk during September and October while Figure 3 is from a recent study on Colockum elk. Hunters will find more elk at higher elevations and away from roads. The wilderness areas in the Yakima herd range can provide excellent hunting opportunity for those willing to invest the effort to chase elk in the high country.

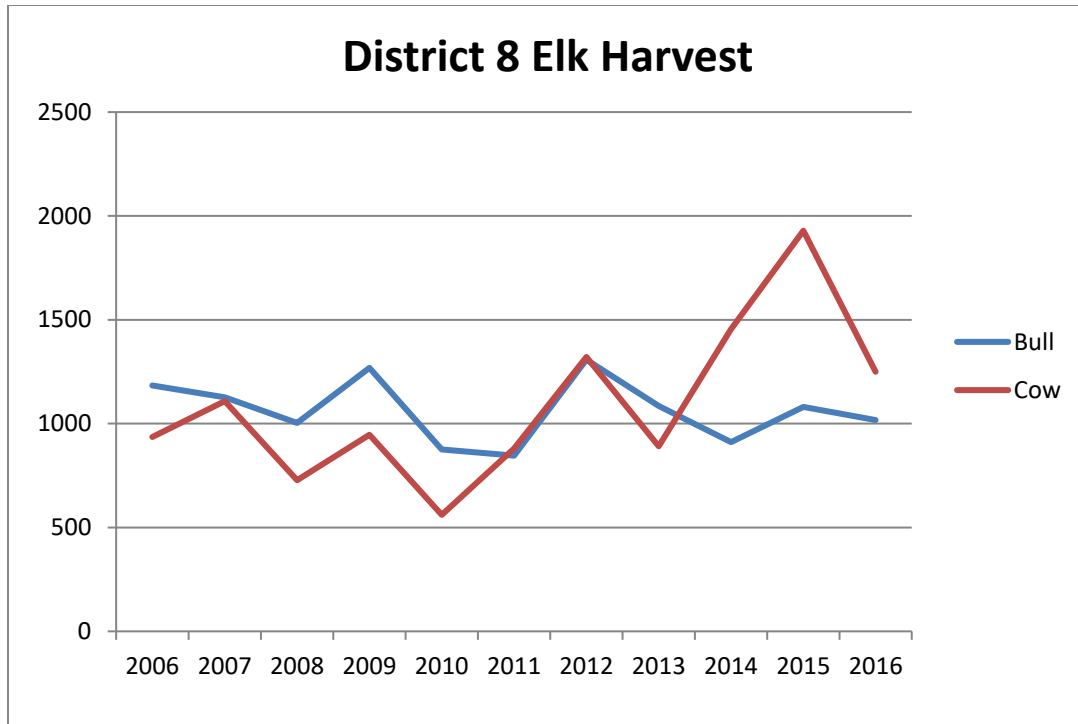


Figure 1. District 8 elk harvest.

Figure 2

**Yakima Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations
during September & October**

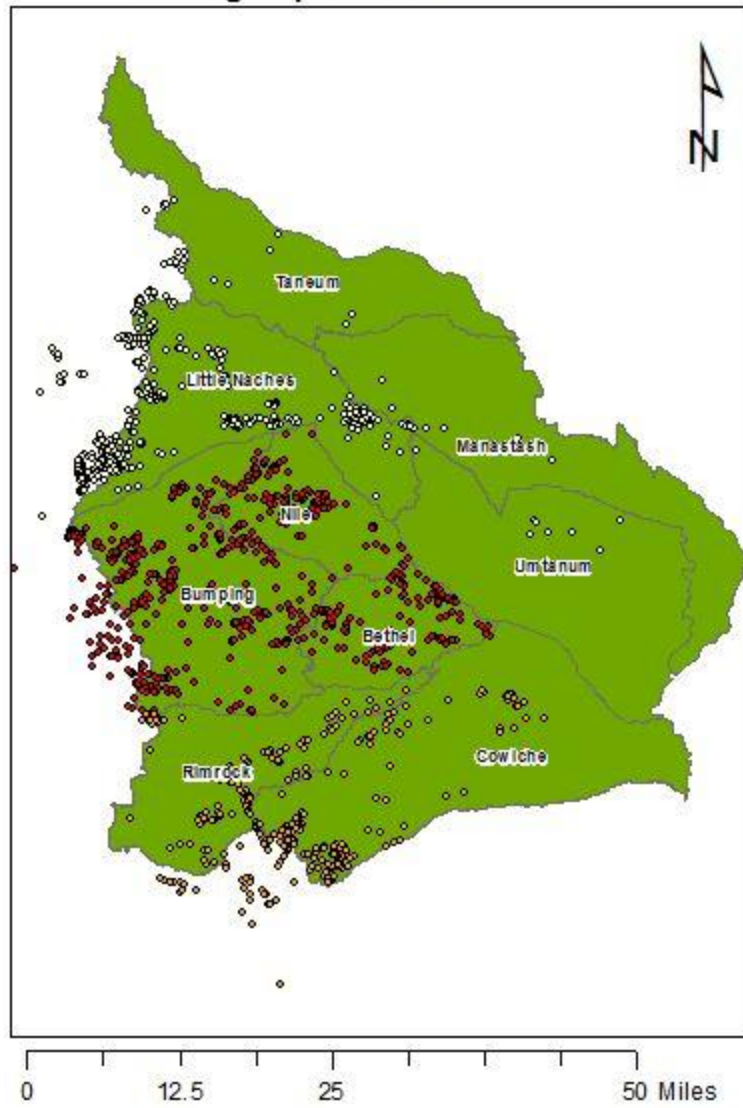
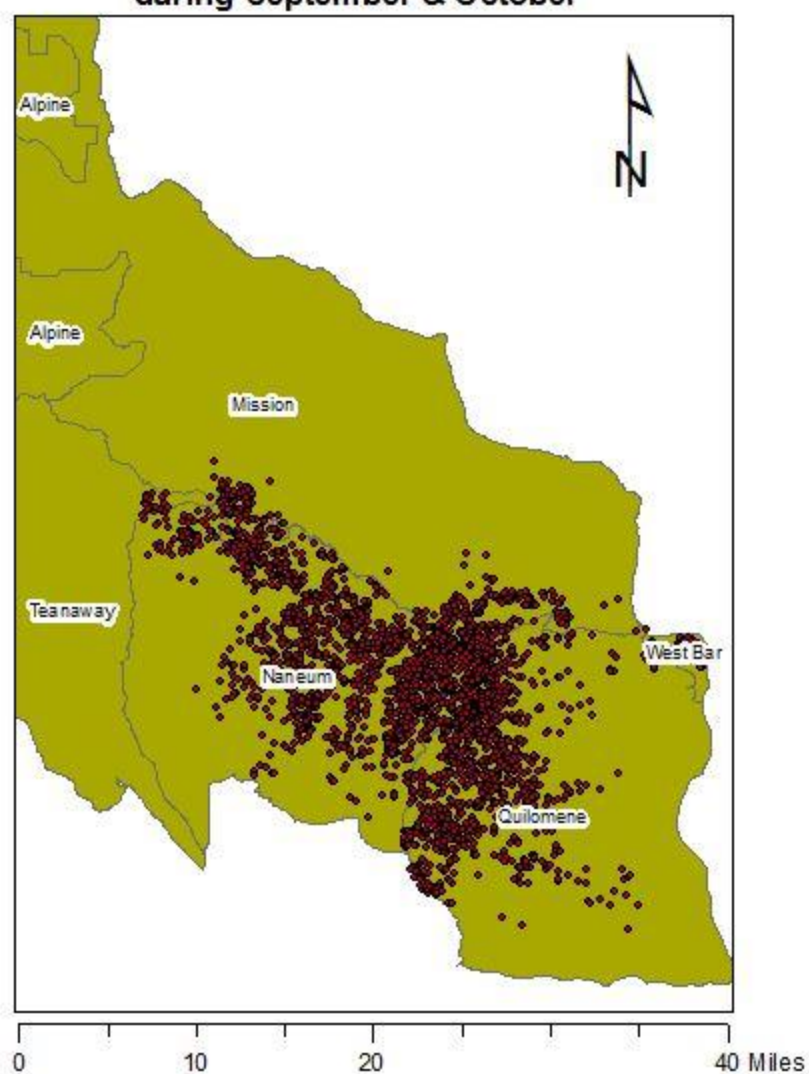


Figure 2. Yakima elk herd collared female elk locations during September and October.

Figure 3

**Colockum Elk Herd, Collared Female Elk Locations
during September & October**



DEER



Deer harvest in District 8 has been down from historic highs for a number of years. The average hunter success the last five years has been eight percent compared to a statewide average of 28 percent. Following a sharp decline from 2004-2006, the harvest has been relatively static (Figure 4). There was an increase in harvest in 2015 following three mild winters with good fawn recruitment. Unfortunately, the hot, dry summer of 2015 was followed by a two relatively hard winters, which has decreased the herd. Much of the harvest is likely 2-3 year-old bucks. Fawns lost the winter of 2015-16 would comprise a large portion of the 2017 harvest. Harvest will likely decline in 2017 through 2018.

Hunter numbers have declined with the reduced deer population. Many of the remaining modern firearm hunters set up camp and claim their favorite spot for elk season. If you are looking for relatively low hunter densities, consider the higher elevations of District 8. Harvest and hunter numbers are typically highest in GMUs 335 (Teanaway), 340 (Manastash), and 342 (Umtanum).

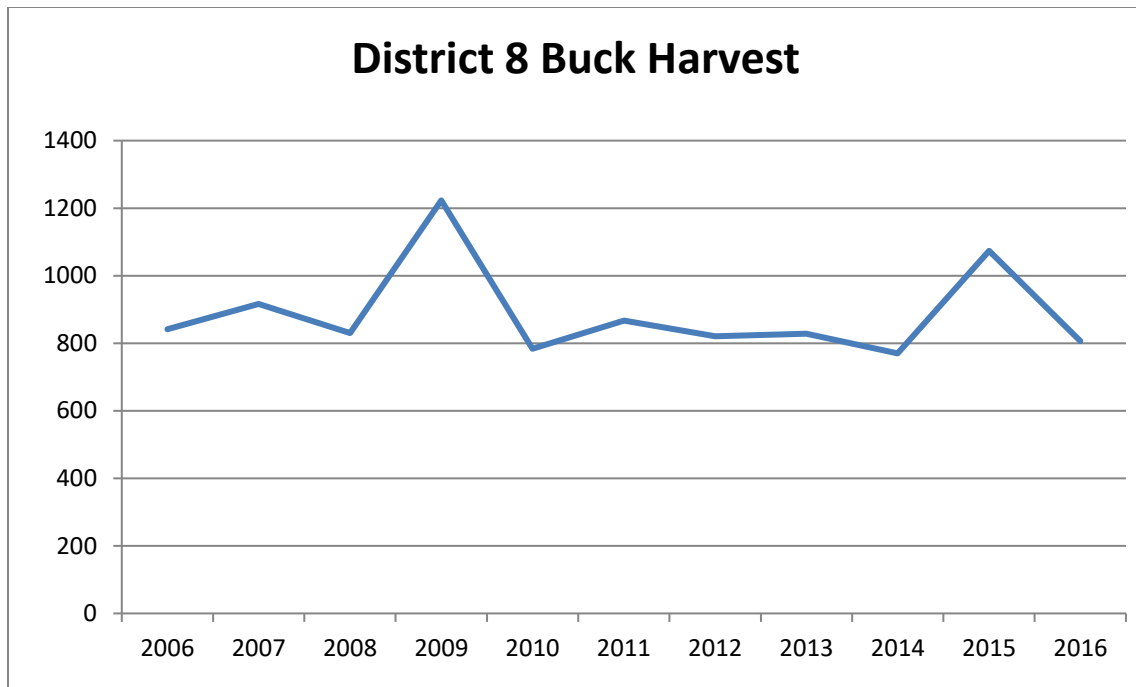


Figure 4. District 8 buck harvest.

WATERFOWL

The USFWS flyway has not yet published the 2017 breeding population estimates. Since 2014, estimates for the flyway have been more than 43 percent above the long term average, yet harvest in District 8 was below average (Figure 5). For local hunters, total ducks in the flyway probably isn't as important as local hunting conditions and available food.

Yakima County has averaged over 30,000 ducks harvested the last five years, which is fourth best in the state. The unfortunate crop trend has been away from corn and toward hops, vineyards, and orchard. Farmers also have a tendency to till stubble shortly after harvest.

An El Niño is predicted for this season, with above normal temperatures and close to normal precipitation. This weather pattern can result in excellent hunting conditions.

The best waterfowl hunting is in the lower Yakima Valley. Public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area (SWA) and Toppenish National Wildlife Refuge (TPNWR). A Marsh Master was just purchased by WDFW for improving waterfowl habitat and hunting access on the SWA. Marshes previously choked with vegetation should be opened up in 2017. Waterfowl hunting should be better than in the past on the SWA and hunters should explore wetlands that were previously hard to hunt.

TPNWR has had difficulty filling wetlands in October. Water is dictated by flows in Toppenish Creek. The Robbins wetlands cannot be filled unless minimum flows are reached in Toppenish

Creek, and Pumphouse wetlands are dependent on side channels to fill in higher flows. Before making a trip to TPNWR, it would be best to call the refuge at 509-865-2405 for conditions. Hunting can be excellent when wetlands are filled.

The Yakama Nation maintains a public hunting program and there are great duck hunting opportunities on the reservation. The Yakama Nation is consistently expanding waterfowl hunting opportunity along the Yakima River. Review their Feel Free to Hunt map annually.

Band returns suggest many locally produced ducks are staying in the Yakima Valley. Early season success is likely tied to regional production. The past spring was extremely wet around the state, resulting in abundant wetlands. Local production should have been excellent. Late season success is probably more dependent on naive northern migrants. The first cold wave is typically around Thanksgiving. Once ponds and sloughs freeze over, the Yakima River can be productive. For the best late season hunting, watch for significant changes in weather. If there is a quick thaw and rain, new ducks enter the valley and a week or so of good hunting can be had before the birds find the safety of private land and the reserves. A freeze and thaw may also fill wetlands that had been dry earlier in the year.

For an excellent introduction to waterfowl hunting, see [Let's Go Waterfowling](#).

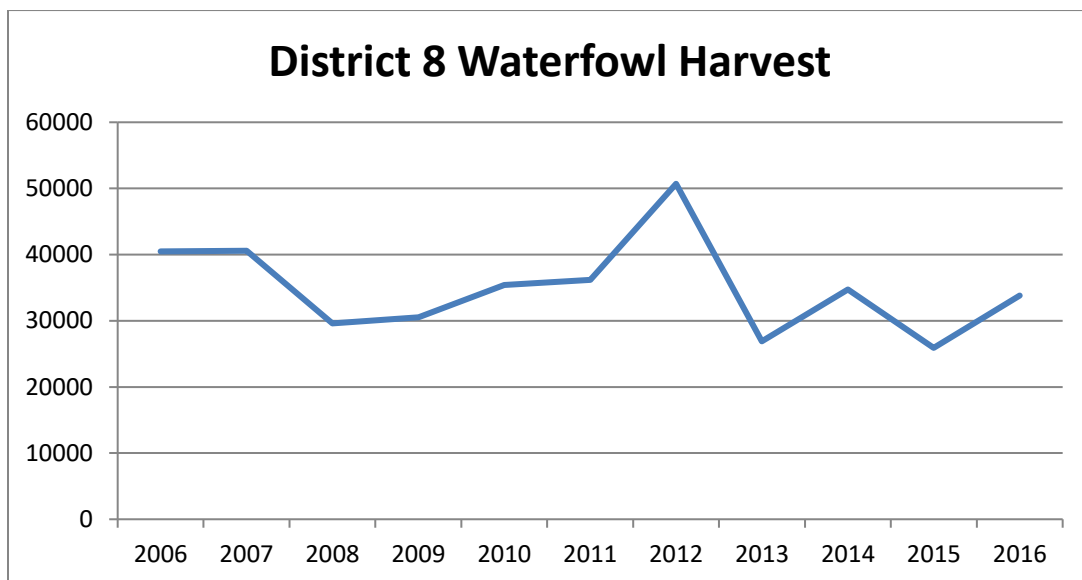


Figure 5. District 8 waterfowl harvest.

DOVE

Yakima County typically ranks second in the state for dove harvest. The best success is in the lower Yakima Valley. Good public hunting can be found on the Sunnyside Wildlife Area and the Yakama Nation Reservation. Yakama Nation grows wheat on portions of their Satus Wildlife Area. For information on hunting on Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

Dove hunting success typically depends on the weather pattern. Warm weather is needed to keep the majority of birds from migrating out of the valley. Cooler weather often hits the area by late August or early September. Despite a 30-day season, the average dove hunter only spends three days (opening weekend) pursuing doves. Harvest and hunter numbers have generally been declining since 2011 (Figure 6).

The prospects for 2016 do not appear to be good at this time. A banding program started in 2003 has found most harvested birds are produced locally. Observations and trapping success indicate poor production in 2017. The reasons are unknown, but generally expect fairly low populations that are mostly older, wiser birds.

Many hunters ask about Eurasian collared dove hunting opportunity, as the season extends year round, without limits. Eurasian collared dove numbers have increased dramatically in the last seven years. No information is collected on harvest, but collared doves are now very common. The problem for hunters is that the majority of collared doves are in urban areas. Collared doves seem to act more like rock doves (pigeons) than mourning doves. Some hunters occasionally find some opportunity at roost sites and in a few fields, but good hunting is rare. Eurasian collared dove harvest is more of a bonus while hunting other birds, rather than a target for most hunters. Making a trip hoping to find Eurasian collared dove opportunity may be frustrating.

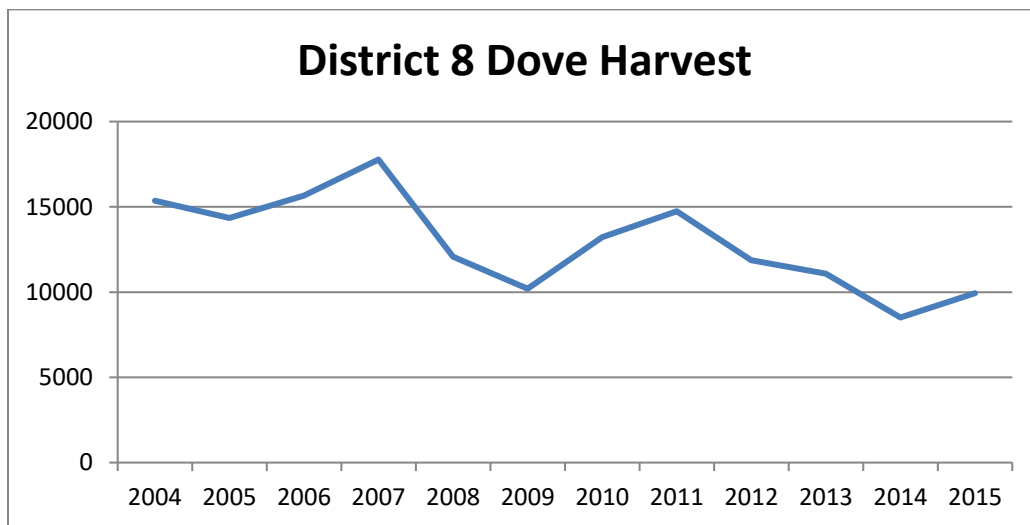


Figure 6. District 8 dove harvest.

FOREST GROUSE



Grouse harvest in District 8 has been fairly stable the last six years (Figure 7) despite fewer hunters and days reported. Harvest per day increased, but was still only 0.3 birds per day. No data are available on the 2017 hatch. Early spring 2017 was much wetter and cooler than normal.

Many grouse hunters drive roads morning and evening, especially when the season first opens. Research suggests brood hens and young are the most vulnerable in early September. Hunters serious about finding grouse should look for areas with low densities of open roads and hike.

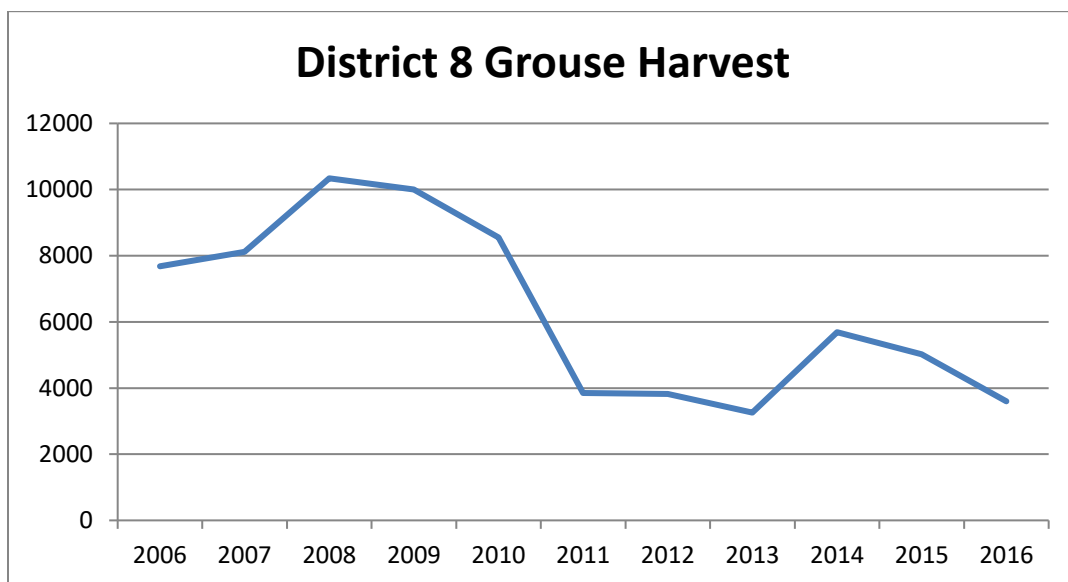


Figure 7. District 8 grouse harvest.

PHEASANT

The 2016 pheasant harvest in District 8 was one the lowest in recent history and continued the long-term decline (Figure 8). There are very few wild pheasant in the district outside of the Lower Yakima Valley on the Yakama Nation Reservation. The trend on the Yakama Nation Reservation has been for declining pheasant populations due to conversion from idle land to crops. There has been no change in this trend. Even though grain prices declined, farmers have switched to crops like hops rather than leave fields idle.

Predicting changes in pheasant numbers based on weather is difficult. More moisture is usually better than less. All upland game birds re-nest. Even the worst spring weather can provide excellent cover and insects for the late hatch. Spring 2017 was very moist and cool. Where available, nesting cover was excellent. Unfortunately, there were few birds last year and it was a long, tough winter. The few remaining birds may have had a good hatch. Even with a good hatch, the small weed patches can only produce small numbers of birds. Hunting will typically only be good for a few weeks on public lands as hatch-year birds get harvested or educated.

No pheasant surveys are conducted in District 8. Yakama Nation conducts production surveys and posts their data in late summer. For information on surveys and hunting the Yakama Nation Reservation, visit ynwildlife.org.

Released pheasants are becoming a significant source of recreation for many hunters. About 1,600 roosters will be released in District 8. The 2017 allocation will be about 800 birds at the Sunnyside Wildlife Area, 500 at Cottonwoods, and 300 at Whiskey Dick. For the youth hunt, birds will only be released at Sunnyside and Cottonwoods. The local chapter of Pheasants Forever (PF) has been raising pheasant in surrogators and releasing at Sunnyside and on the Yakama Nation Reservation. The Yakama Nation also raises and releases birds over the summer. Research in Nebraska found only 12 percent of surrogator raised pheasant survived to hunting season, 3.5 percent were harvested, and only one percent survived one year. The surrogator raised birds might help maintain some harvest, but will have no positive affect on population.

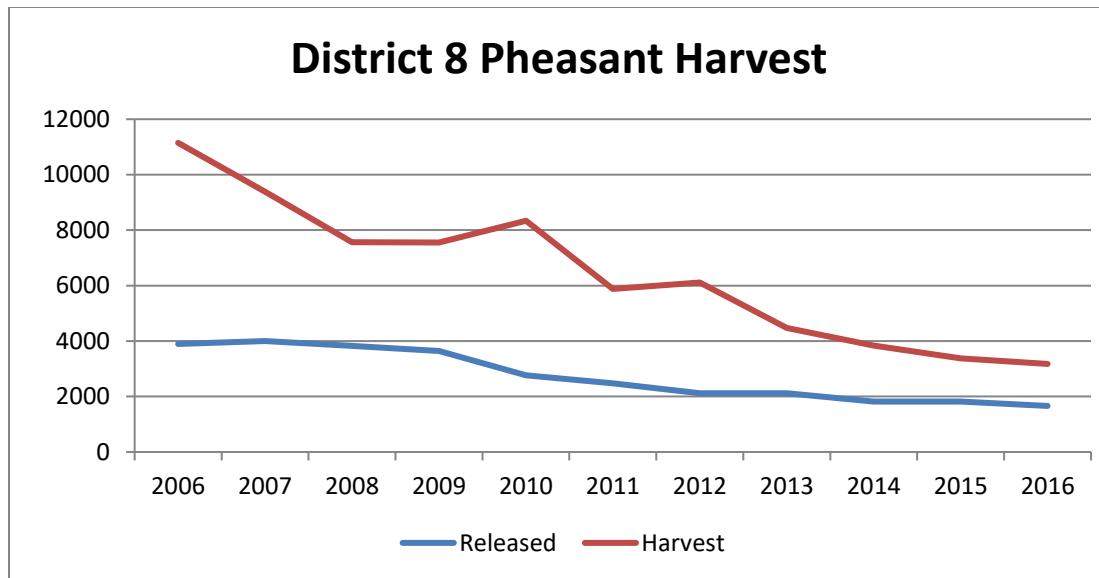


Figure 8. District 8 pheasant harvest.

QUAIL

California quail can be found in most non-timbered portions of the district. The best habitat and highest number of quail can be found in the lower Yakima Valley. This is evident in the harvest statistics where Yakima County leads the state in quail harvest with an average of 17,000 birds over the last five years. In Kittitas County, the average quail harvest is only 1,500.

The trend has been for declining total quail harvest (Figure 9). This trend may not represent actual quail populations, as surveys on the Yakama Nation Reservation have found increasing numbers of birds (Figure 10). Quail are often secondary quarry to pheasant hunters. The lack of pheasant and pheasant hunters might be contributing to the decline in total harvest. Yakama Nation will post quail survey numbers later this summer.

The quail population in 2017 will likely be low. The winter of 2016-17 was the longest and hardest in 20 years. Snow persisted over the entire district for almost three months. The highest densities of quail are along the riparian areas in the lower Yakima Valley. Typically, the lower valley has less snow and it melts quickly. That was not the case in 2016-17, as the snow was deeper and more persistent than areas further north. By mid-January, very high mortality was obvious and snow cover stayed on the ground into late February.

Quail can produce large clutches and rebound quickly. Vegetation growth was excellent and the remaining birds likely had high success. There will be good pockets of quail where they survived the winter. Areas near artificial food sources (houses, cattle feed lots) have the highest probability of good bird numbers.

WDFW owns various parcels along the lower Yakima River that hold good numbers of quail that are part of the Sunnyside Wildlife Area. Yakama Nation runs an excellent hunting program and has great quail hunting opportunity. For information on surveys and hunting Yakama Nation land, visit ynwildlife.org.

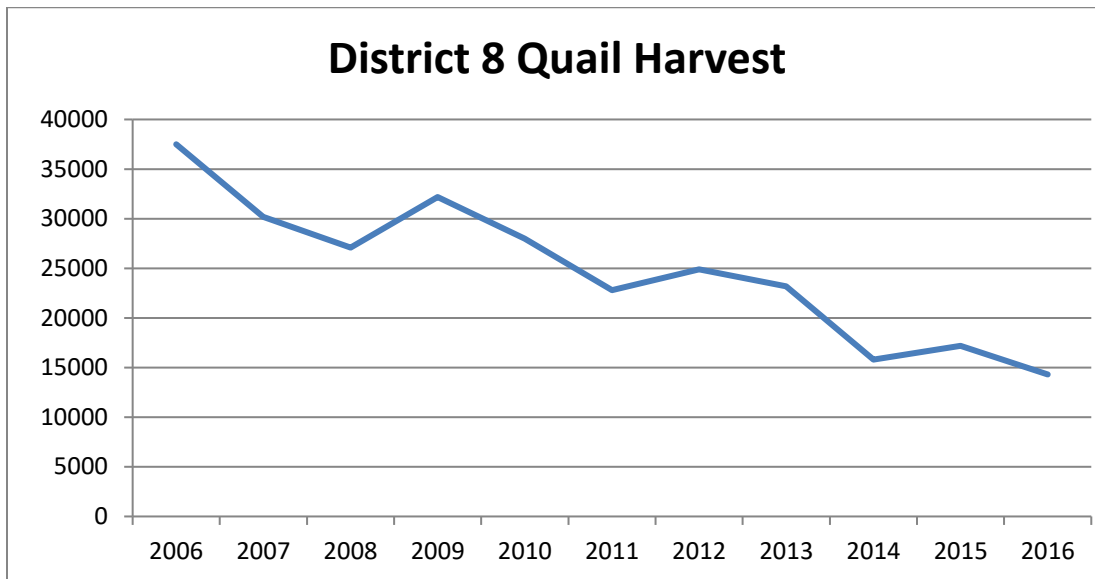


Figure 9. District 8 quail harvest.

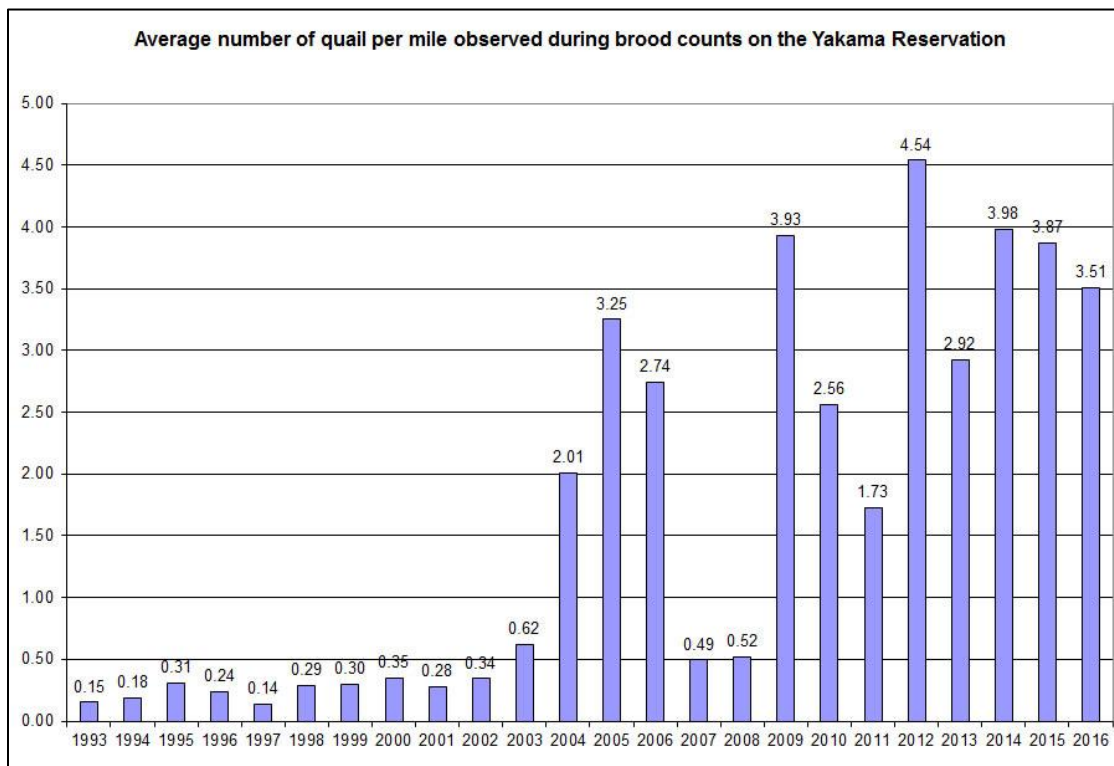


Figure 10. Average number of quail per mile observed during brood counts on the Yakama Nation Reservation.

TURKEY



Turkey populations had been doing fairly well in the district following releases in the late 1990s, but declined from 2011-2014 (Figure 11). Populations now may be rebuilding. It is not unusual for newly established populations to reach high numbers before declining to a lower level. Most of the harvest in the district comes from the northern portion (GMUs 328 [Naneum], 329 [Quilomene], and 335 [Teanaway]). The best populations early in the spring are on private lands in the lower elevations of GMU 335. By May, some birds will be moving into higher elevations on the Teanaway Community Forest.

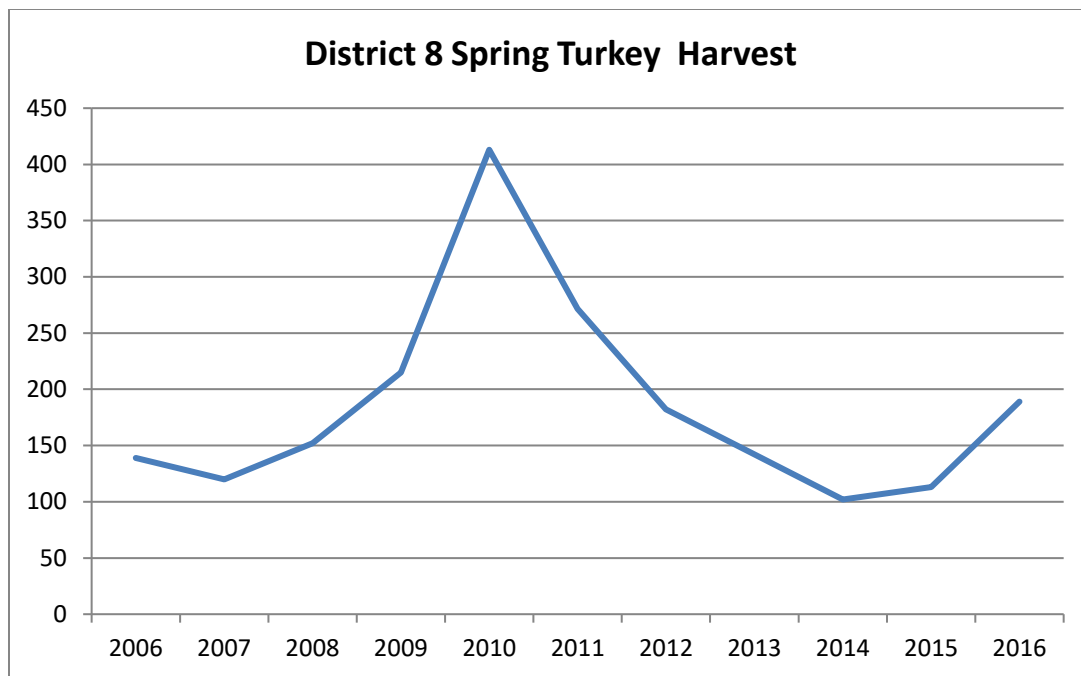


Figure 11. District 8 spring turkey harvest.

PARTRIDGE (CHUKAR/HUNGARIAN)



Partridge harvest in the district has been around 3,000 birds the last few years. Populations had been highest north of I-90 and along the western portions of chukar range in Yakima County. In the drier central and eastern portions of the district, bird populations remained low. The winter of 2016-17 was likely hard on partridge. The snow was deep and persistent for three months. Concentrations of birds did survive in some pockets, but not uniformly across the range.

No information is available on the 2017 hatch, but it probably did well with the high soil moisture. There just were not many birds entering the spring. Good populations will be localized in areas with very steep south slopes and decent brush cover where birds survived the winter.

There is plenty of public land for partridge hunting in the district. The best populations are expected on the Quilomene and Colockum wildlife areas, where birds may have found more open terrain during winter near the Columbia River. Some birds are expected to have survived on Clemans Mountain on the Oak Creek Wildlife Area. Populations are not expected to be very high on the Yakima Training Center. Recent fires, lack of shrub cover, and snow have probably kept the populations depressed.

The Yakima Training Center used to be a very popular spot for upland bird hunters. Decreased access due to military training and increased restrictions have limited the number of Yakima Training Center upland bird hunters the last five years. Access to Yakima Training Center in fall

2017 is unknown at this writing. Note that identification requirements have changed. Hunters must go through a brief orientation, pay a \$10 fee, and register their firearms with Yakima Training Center. For more information on the orientation and rules on Yakima Training Center, call 509-577-3208 or 509-577-3209.

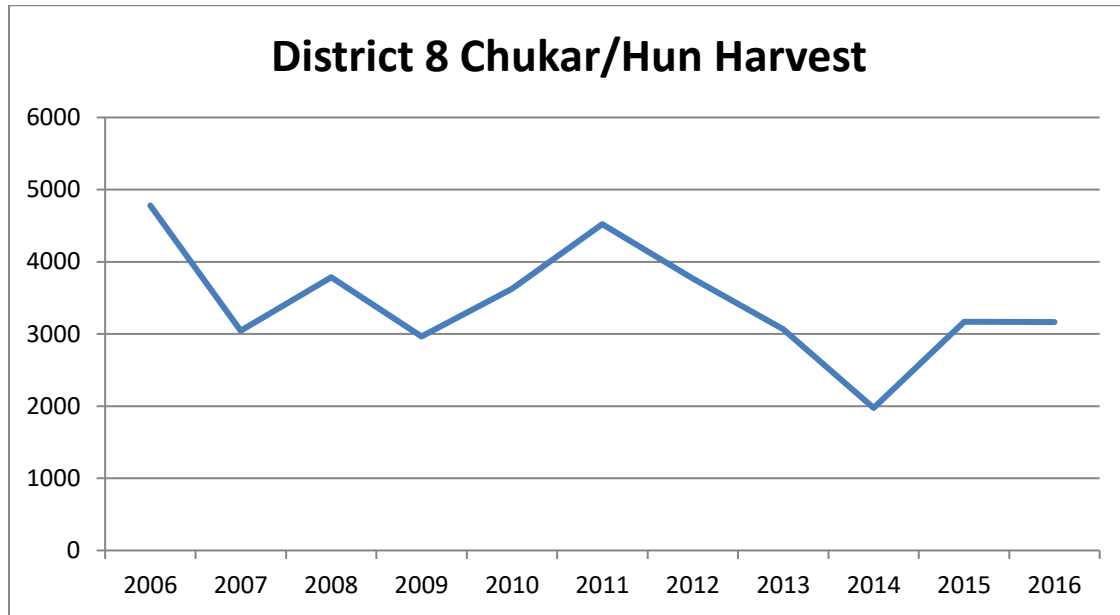


Figure 12. District 8 chukar/hun harvest